

BLIZZARD OF '49, WYOMING PUBLIC TELEVISION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Kyle: So take it from the top with your name and then we'll dive in with the story again.

Jimmy: My name is Jimmy Shane. We live at Node, Wyoming. As far as the storm, anyone that went through it will never forget it. We've had other storms in the past but nothing that would compare to 60-70 mile an hour winds that we had, below zero temperatures and it lasted continuously for 3 days and 3 nights with no let up. It caught people by surprise, even the US Weather Bureau experts didn't see it coming. They were predicting possible snow flurries.

It covered an area from Canada to Mexico and all states in between. Southern states had tornadoes. California had record low temperatures. We had 6 major blizzards and several of less severity recorded between January 2nd and February 19th. All forms of transportation were shut down. People were stranded in vehicles, buses and trains. At Lusk, the railroad was closed for 21 days consecutively, the longest time in the history of the town. Some of the drifts were so hard on the railroad that they had to use dynamite to blast them loose so they could open them.

President Truman gave General Pick a blank check and told him to dig out the west and that they did. Army, Navy, Air Force, National Guard, private contractors [00:02:00] came in with thousands of pieces of equipment to open roads and rescue people. They got in the area just as soon as the rail lines were open so they could get here. In the entire area, there were more than 50 trains stalled on the tracks with over 8,000 passengers aboard.

One thing that made it bad was most houses were not insulated and built like they are today. I said a bushel full of snow would come in a nail hole and I believe that's right.

Kyle: Because it was driven so fiercely?

Jimmy: It was driven by such a terrible wind and the snow was so fine. Some people ended up burning furniture to keep warm. You didn't have to worry about getting drink of water. You could usually find a snowbank in the house somewhere and melt the snow for water. Of course, this was at a time when we had no phones, no television, no electricity. There just wasn't much to do but sit and wait it out.

I think one of the things that I remember the most about the storm though, other than the severity of it, was the static electricity in the air. I'd never seen anything like it before or since. We had 6 guns and rifles hanging on our living room wall. They were all pointed in the same direction, they were not pointed together but there was a steady stream of sparks come out of those gun barrels for 3 days and 3 nights. We tried to play cards but the cards would stick to the table to where you just had [00:04:00] to literally get a hold of them and drag them off. You couldn't just pick them up. Anything that was metal would just snap like a hot shock when you touched it. I knew I wasn't imagining this but in all the stories that we collected, there was only 1 other one that mentioned it and she's sitting here today. Pat Garner, she mentioned it in her story. I had read about it in the blizzard of 1888 and they mentioned the static electricity then but I thought it was kind of odd I remembered it so well and nobody else hardly had mentioned it.

Kyle: So it was probably a combination of the cold and the dryness that created it?

Jimmy: I think it was and the velocity of the wind and just the fineness of the snow. That's all I would know.

Kyle: So sparks were literally shooting out of the ends?

Jimmy: Oh yes, they were. Just straight out continuous for 3 days and 3 nights. We were afraid to put them in the closet for fear we'd start a fire.

Kyle: That's amazing. You mentioned a story about a lady that was left at home with 2 small children, do you recall talking about that? And her husband tried to take some of the family back home.

Jimmy: Yes, I do.

Kyle: Why don't you talk about that story?

Jimmy: Well, this lady lived south of Van Tassel actually. She wasn't really a country woman to start with, she married into it. But yes, she was left at home with her 2 small children while her husband tried to take some of the relatives back home north of Harrison and he never made it back. He survived but he was a week or more of getting back home.

Of [00:06:00] course, everybody closed off all the rooms in their houses they could and still keep heat in what they could. She closed off her bedroom and she said it got down to 27 below in that bedroom and I'm sure it did. If it was 27 below outside, it was probably 27 below inside with the room shut off because

houses had no insulation in those days and windows were poor. Nothing like we have today.

Kyle: The house your folks had, the house you were living in, was kind of the same way?

Jimmy: It was the same way. Actually, it was built out of two homestead shacks back in the early 1900s. No insulation whatsoever. It was quite drafty. I don't remember any snow coming in though.

Kyle: I'm sure you heard stories of snow coming into folks attics and them not realizing it.

Jimmy: Oh yes.

Kyle: I wonder if you could talk about that. And then they warmed it up. Start that from the beginning.

Jimmy: Well, yes, after it would warm up, people would sit.

Kyle: Start from the beginning. We're talking about snow infiltrating people's attics, so start with that thought.

Jimmy: In one story, one man told me that they had a drift 3 foot deep in their living room that came through the keyhole, and the crack around the door, I'm sure. The door was on the north side. The snow got into people's attics and they didn't realize it at the time. Then later when it warmed up, their ceiling would start dripping and usually the plaster or whatever was on the ceiling would end up falling down.

Kyle: You were on a ranch [00:08:00] ...

Jimmy: Yes.

Kyle: And you had animals?

Jimmy: We had about 40 head of cattle at that time, cows. They had had a couple hundred head of sheep before that but they sold them that fall and it's a good thing they did or they would've probably lost them all. My dad and I, we did manage to get our cattle into corrals in front of the barn. My dad and I went out every morning. We would hold hands so that we wouldn't get separated because visibility was so poor, you couldn't see your hand in front of your face hardly. We would have to stop on the way out and break the ice off of our eyelashes so we could see. We had some little square bales handy to where we could either

throw them to the cattle by hand or drag them with a saddle horse. We did get them fed every day. We would have to go around and break the ice off of their chin and their faces so they could see and eat.

I said we held on the hands every time we went out so we wouldn't get separated but one day, for some reason or another, we didn't have a hold of each other. About halfway to the house, we sensed that maybe the other one maybe wasn't right there. We hollered and one of us was on one side of a windmill tower and the other one was just on the other side. That's only about 6 feet apart but you couldn't see each other. We did get back together and made it to the house.

Kyle: That's just blinding snow.

Jimmy: It was. Unlike anything I'd ever seen before and I hope I never see anything like it again.

Kyle: Throughout the storm, being a ranch kid, you must have had chores to do.

Jimmy: Well I say, we got out every day and hayed our cows [00:10:00] but that was about all you could do. If they hadn't been right there in the corral, we couldn't have done that.

Kyle: You didn't lose any livestock?

Jimmy: No, we were fortunate and didn't lose any.

Kyle: What about some of the other folks in the area?

Jimmy: Some of the others took some real heavy losses. One man south of Van Tassel happened to be caught in town. His wife was in the hospital delivering a child. He got stranded in town. After the blizzard let up, he walked from Lusk to his place south of Van Tassel which was probably close to 25 miles and he had about 100 head of yearlings and when he got home, he found them all dead. Another ranch around Van Tassel lost about 150 head that drifted out on the ice on the river and froze to death. There were some bad losses.

Kyle: I understand a lot of cattle just suffocated too?

Jimmy: They did. I never saw this but I've seen stories and also pictures of cattle standing up literally frozen to death.

Kyle: Tough. There were some really serious sheep losses too, I take it?

Jimmy: Yes, my wife has a story about some sheep losses.

Kyle: We'll get to that.

Jimmy: One story.

Kyle: Can we talk a little bit about the railroad shutting down and the trains being stranded, were you involved at all in shoveling? I know Jack talked about that. Were you involved with shoveling out trains at all?

Jimmy: No, I wasn't. [00:12:00] In the first place, the only way I could've gotten there would've been to have walked. Our place was about 4 miles from the railroad and we could watch them trying to open the railroad from there. Some days they wouldn't make hardly any progress at all. Then it would blow right back in, it seemed like, the next day or two, harder and deeper than it was before.

Kyle: Did you make it into Lusk itself during that series of blizzards?

Jimmy: Oh no.

Kyle: Couldn't get out?

Jimmy: I'm going to say probably at least 2 weeks after that before we got into Lusk. The county did what they could with the equipment they had opening trails like into our place. They didn't try to open the road, they just come across the country. I would say the first time we got to town was probably 2 weeks. If the county or the Army, Navy, whatever, if they came in with a piece of equipment regardless of what time of the day or night it was, you better go to town right behind them. We came to town about 9:00 one night, got a guy out of bed at the grocery store to get groceries. Got a couple barrels of fuel. The merchants were more than glad to get up and help people any time, day or night.

Kyle: That was one of the things as I've been researching the story, that I was really struck by, just how people pulled together, pitched in and everybody helped each other out.

Jimmy: They really did. [00:14:00]

Kyle: Also, you were talking about the Army, was there a lot of Army vehicles here in Lusk itself?

Jimmy: Oh yes, there was. Now, I said they came in right away which they did. Of course, they couldn't get everywhere at the same time. It was into February before they ever came into our place. After that, it stayed open pretty good. They just

plowed a trail into our place, plowed into some haystacks, plowed out some corrals. It was really a big help.

Kyle: Did you witness any air drops?

Jimmy: I didn't actually witness any but they did have what they call Operation Airlift, Haylift. They dropped hay to stranded livestock. I don't know for sure if this is a true story or not but they told about a man stranded north of Lusk that had a big fur coat and he put that on and started walking towards Lusk. A plane flew over and dropped him a bale of hay. He didn't know if they were just having fun or if they actually thought it was an animal.

Kyle: I also read stories that there were, in many of the towns that the Air Force was doing those hay drops, local citizens would go up with them so they could kind of guide them to get the lay of the land.

Jimmy: They did and directed them to different ranches and where the livestock was and so forth.

Kyle: The storm, because it was the day after New Years and it was a Sunday, there [00:16:00] were a lot of people traveling. I think that you said before that there were quite a few people stranded here in Lusk. I wonder if you could talk about that a little more?

Jimmy: It was a bad time for it to hit because like you mentioned, people were gone on vacation or maybe just returning home and we were some of those people. We had just gotten into Lusk the night before and rather than just trying to go home, we stayed overnight and fortunately got home the next morning. Then the storm hit that afternoon. There were over 400 people stranded here in Lusk, a town of approximately at that time, something just under 2,000 people. The motels, hotel were all full. People stayed in private homes, church basements, anywhere they could get and they were glad to get there.

Kyle: Carmen was talking about asking a question about dairy farms?

Jimmy: There were several small dairies around lusk. One in particular, out north of Lusk, probably 25-30 miles, those people were stranded in town and didn't get home for like a week. Of course, their cows weren't milked in the meantime and their bags swelled up so bad, they actually ruptured.

Kyle: That's awful.

Jimmy: It was awful. [00:18:00]

Kyle: You told me just a little humorous aside about this guy named Hap Tollman. Why don't you repeat that story for me?

Jimmy: Yeah, they tell the story of a bunch of people were sitting around somewhere telling stories about the blizzard and this one bachelor he kept saying "We lost every chicken we had." Somebody else would tell another story and "Yep, we lost every chicken we had." Finally, after about 3 or 4 times, somebody said "Well Hap, how many chickens did you have?" He said "One."

Kyle: Oh my gosh. You also talked about a guy being trapped in his car for 3 days and kind of likening it to a POW camp. I wonder if you could talk about that again?

Jimmy: Well, I read this story. It happened down in Colorado. The man was trapped in his car for 3 days. I think there was 2 or 3 other people in there with him. He compared it to being in prison camp during World War II and he said this was worse. Now, I have to think that in saying that, he probably felt he was closer to death during this storm than he ever was in that prison camp. I don't know, that's just my thinking but that's what he said.

Kyle: Do you think that this intensity of this storm and the long lasting storms that blew in after it, were people starting to fear for their lives a little bit, do you think?

Jimmy: Oh, I'm sure they were. Yes. Communications were so poor in those days. Like I say, we had no telephone. [00:20:00] I think I told you this story earlier when we talked about a family out around Lanscrick that the mother and the son and a daughter started for New Castle where the children were going to school and their father had to go to Douglas on some business. Well anyway, the mother and the son and the daughter, they started to New Castle and the couldn't go any farther and they come along a car.

They found a car stranded on the road. The son got out and hammered on the roof and asked if anybody was in there. A voice came out and said that there was. So he got them shoveled out and I believe there was 6 of them he said, rode in the front seat of that pickup back to Clariton. I believe that was Clariton, I may be wrong on that. Anyway, they found a farmhouse. They ended up walking a quarter of a mile then and run onto this farmhouse. They weren't even sure it was the house until they found the door and found it was. There was 13 other people in there and they were there during the duration of the storm. They took turns sleeping on the beds and on the floor. One morning, on man got up and his pillow was froze to his face where the snow had drifted in and froze it to his face.

Then their father, he had no idea where they were or if they were even alive or not. So he borrowed a horse and rode from Douglas clear on up past the

Cheyenne River before he ever could get to a phone and find out that [00:22:00] his wife and family were okay. As far as I know, as far as loss of life, the only one that I can remember hearing about was a truck driver east of Harrison that froze to death.

Kyle: Got stranded in his truck and probably ran out of gas.

Jimmy: Right. I can tell another story about a local man who was working for the highway department here. Him and another fellow went out and even though they worked for the highway department, they were trying to open the curtly road. They had a snow blower on the front of a 6x6 rotary snow plow. They got down that curtly road a few miles and decided they better be heading back to town. Well, they got stuck before they got back to the highway and they had to spend the night in that 6x6 with a makeshift plywood cab on it. I don't know why but they had a blowtorch along and they did have a little gas. So they fired up that blowtorch and they would set it on the door of the glove compartment and warm their upper bodies. Then they would put it on the floor and warm their feet. They spent the night in that. The next morning, they walked over to the highway. Actually, his father-in-law was a patrolman and he was sitting there waiting for them and brought them into town.

Kyle: I remembered seeing some of the pictures we were talking about. Those flint picture earlier of that '49 Ford with the drifts.

Jimmy: Oh yes.

Kyle: How high do you suppose the drifts were in and around the Lusk area?

Jimmy: Well, that same patrolman was standing on that '49 Ford car with his hands stretched up in the air. He was at least 6 foot tall himself and [00:24:00] those drifts were several times taller than he was. There was drifts 20-30 feet deep really on the highway and the railroad.

Kyle: Was there any official kind of record estimate of the amount of snow that fell on the level ever in this area?

Jimmy: You know, I'm sure there was. I can't tell you except I know it varied considerably. I'm going to say it was at least 3 feet that fell and then drifted into these enormous drifts and terribly hard drifts.

Kyle: Were the drifts shifting a lot with the winds?

Jimmy: One day the wind would blow out of one direction, the next day, they'd blow out of a different direction. That's what made it so bad trying to open the highways

and the railroads. They would just get a stretch open for a few miles and then it would blow back in just as deep or deeper and harder than it was before.

Kyle: Someone was telling me, I can't remember if it was you or not, but when the snow blew back into the plowed areas, it was even tougher to remove ...

Jimmy: It was.

Kyle: So often times, they would just try to forge a new path.

Jimmy: Well, on the roads, yes. On the railroads, of course they couldn't do that. They just had to literally try to open whatever was in front of them. Sometimes they would get the snowplow derailed. Other times they would get stuck and literally have to dig them out by hand.

Kyle: I also read stories about plows hit frozen animals.

Jimmy: Yes, I'm sure that happened.

Kyle: Or buried cars, for that matter.

Jimmy: Yes, that could've happened.

Kyle: You want to bring Carmen? Carmen, you want to come out [00:26:00] now? I think that's pretty much what we had covered before.